SEQUENCEBREAK//

experimental arcade

HEART STREET

STEPHEN -thecatamites- GILLMURPHY

PHILIP MALLORY JONES

NATHALIE LAWHEAD

CASSIE MCQUATER

march 20 - june 28, 2025 ◢ visual studies workshop

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SEQUENCEBREAK//

experimental arcade

March 20 - June 28, 2025

Visual Studies Workshop
Rochester, New York

SEQUENCEBREAK// is a dynamic, multimedia exhibition featuring works by artists who challenge mainstream commercial video game culture through genre-expanding experimental play, radical aesthetics, and the use of DIY, counter-capitalist methodologies. The exhibition offers an in-person opportunity that is unique to the contemporary experience of playing digital games, while opening a broader dialogue with a virtual audience through streaming artist talks, workshops, and gallery tours.

The artists featured in SEQUENCEBREAK// are Stephen Gillmurphy (thecatamites), Nathalie Lawhead, Philip Mallory Jones, Cassie McQuater, and Heart Street (Yuxin Gao, Lillyan Ling, Gus Boehling, and John Bruneau). This exhibition is curated by Nilson Carroll, VSW Assistant Curator.

//events//

SEQUENCEBREAK//
Exhibition runs March 20 -- June 28, 2025

Opening Party:
March 20, 6-9pm
with deejay set by Sound Test

Closing Party:
June 26, 6-9pm
with artists' games jam screening (see page 6)

SAT. MARCH 8, 1-3pm

Playable Documentaries: In Conversation with Heart Street

Online

Heart Street (Yuxin Gao, Lillyan Ling, Gus Boehling, John Bruneau) is a loosely structured collective created by indie game artists in New York City. On Saturday March 8, VSW will host an artist talk/panel discussion with members of Heart Street. Joining us online, the artists will speak about the inspiration that sparked Out for Delivery, and how the game blends various genres to create a wholly original experience.

THURS. MARCH 27, 7-9pm

Archival Authenticity: In Conversation with Philip Mallory Jones

In-Person/Online

Philip Mallory Jones is internationally recognized as an innovator and educator in the media arts, with a career spanning more than half a century. On March 27, Jones will speak about his work on Time Machine Bronzeville, a narrative-driven video game that "explores the stories, cityscape, and legend and lore of Chicago's South Side circa 1940."

THURS. MAY 8, 7-9pm

Live Walkthroughs: Nathalie Lawhead

In-Person/Online

Nathalie Lawhead is a net-artist and game designer that has been creating experimental digital art since the late 1990s. Join us May 8 for an experimental "let's play" of Lawhead's artists' games with the artist. Serving as a hybrid artist talk, game walkthrough, and Twitch stream, this online and in-person event will be an opportunity for exploration, sharing insight, and community connection.
The opposite of a "speedrun" (a competitive, timed-based way of playing a video game), this walkthrough encourages dialogue between artist and audience.

THURS. JUNE 12, 7-10pm

Let's Play Collectively: Tips + Tricks for SEQUENCEBREAK//

In-Person/Online

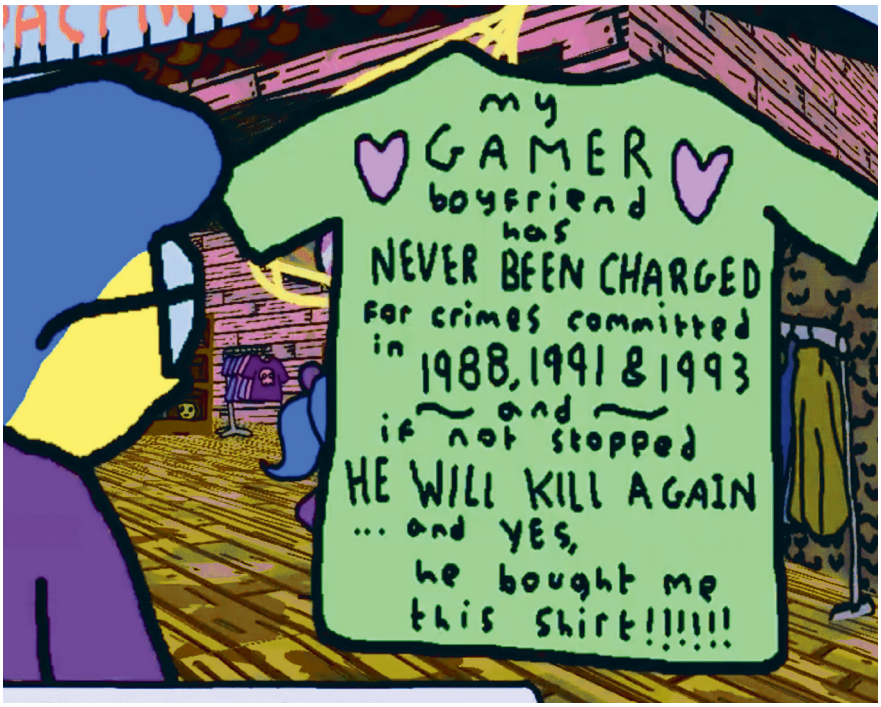
Join us for a hybrid curator talk + live walkthrough of work featured in the exhibition SEQUENCEBREAK//, both in-person and streamed online. Led by Rochester-based game artists and curators, this event invites the audience to play, experiment, and have an open dialogue on artists' games. Participation highly encouraged but not necessary! Snacks will be provided. Attendees may come and go throughout the event.

SAT. JUNE 14, 12–4pm

Coding in the Park (workshop)

In-Person
Free to attend but please RSVP

Are you interested in making small games or web art? Don't know where to begin? Coding in the Park is a free, accessible, community-oriented gathering for artists of all skill levels to learn about approachable workflows to making game art. Informed by a "beginner's guide to game-making" toolkit and led by VSW Assistant Curator and video game artist Nilson Carroll, this event features brief demonstrations and exercises in the first hour, with the afternoon left for creating, sharing, and question-asking. Collaboration is encouraged! Folks of all skill levels are encouraged to participate.



Anthology of the Killer by Stephen Gillmurphy

f o r e w o r d

by nilson carroll

A familiar scene: Rapidly scrawling notes in marker as they bleed through the layers of napkin, I try once again to map out a complex web of definitions—what is an "art game" versus an "arthouse game" versus an "indie game" versus a "small game" versus a "serious game"? When speaking broadly about "video game art," where does one include *machinima*, the genre of video art derived from video game footage, or ROM hacks, DIY modifications to existing commercially available games? What about glitch art, an extreme appropriation of a game's code, or even mainstream video games made by large teams that heavily feature radical aesthetics, poetic or political themes, or exist as intense expressions from their authors?

By design, there are no easy binary distinctions to group the artists' games featured in *SEQUENCEBREAK//*. Some of them can be played for free on the internet, while others can be experienced by paying a fee on the digital storefront Steam. Some of the games were made in Unity or Unreal Engine, industry-standard game engines, while others were handmade from scratch. Some build directly on the robust legacy of online DIY subcultures, while others were made in isolation or in conversation with other types of in-real-life communities.

I prefer the phrase *artists' games* (after *artists' books*) here rather than *art games* for two reasons. One, all video games are artworks, which confuses the issue. Two, my focus is on the intentionality and methodology of each artist instead of the games themselves as (digital) art objects.

Some artists' games seek to remove competition from play, instead focusing on the experiential—whether narrative or non-narrative. Some artists' games use the language of their mainstream counterparts, whereas others strive to move away from commercial values and design philosophies. Some are more in dialogue with "games" and some with "art." Many artists' games could be described as "fun," and many others seek to move players to see or feel from a different perspective. Many artists' games make use of the medium's unique characteristic of interactivity, finding a balance of form and content, playable poetry—*structural* games. Artists' games consider their player as more than just a customer. They are often artworks that emerge from within rich subcultures against a backdrop of a distant, immutable commercial industry.

Since 1969, Visual Studies Workshop has been a site for artistic experimentation, giving room for exploring the depth of expression within the emerging fields of photography, artists' books, and media art. The history of and approaches to artists' games run parallel to these other mediums in how they are used by artists and engaged with by audiences. *SEQUENCEBREAK//* is not the first screen-based exhibition of interactive software held at VSW. In 1993, Brian Goldfarb curated *Digital Check-Up*, an "interactive media exhibition of computer works about health and medicine by artists, educators, and medical professionals," highlighting revolutionary media and AIDS education software. Forward-thinking, this exhibition not only blurred the lines between art and software, but put various types of makers, artists, and developers in conversation with one another.

SEQUENCEBREAK// is not meant to be a historical survey of artists' games, nor is it curated around a specific theme. Each artist follows a different methodology of expression, working outside the boundaries of established genres:

Opposite: Stills from *Black Room* by Cassie McQuater

games, websites, documentaries, performance, or books. The term "sequence break" refers to the act of going outside of the intended linear sequence featured in a video game, breaking the game's designed boundaries toward a new form of play or pathfinding. Sequence breaking is a common technique in *speedrunning*, a competitive type of timed play that forces players to form a deep relationship with a piece of software in order to understand it, often more closely than even its creators. A quick scan of a user-generated list of sequence breaks for *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), for example, unveils small bits of game-poetry: "all the Lord Souls are rendered unnecessary" or "you can avoid the mandatory death"—rules are shattered by curious players wielding powerful glitches. To "sequence break" means to go out of order, to push oneself into the margins, to gain a different perspective, to reject rigidness, and to engage in *possibility*.

There are many approaches to showing games in art spaces. A curator can focus on games as design objects, for instance, or include an interactive digital work that fits an exhibition theme among other mediums. An exhibition exploring the topic of video games may include game-inspired paintings, looping *machinima*, or framed limited-edition prints of game screenshots. For *SEQUENCEBREAK//*, it was important to exhibit the selected games as they are: interactive media, in an in-person setting over a long period of time, allowing for multiple visits.

The arcade traditionally operates on both community and competition, featuring a slew of hi-score lists to overcome, brag about, and throw quarters at. Lit by brilliant, flashing attract modes, friends gather around pizza, swapping ~~war~~ love stories and discussing strategies. The games featured in *SEQUENCEBREAK//* do not have leaderboards, but they do hold secrets that take time to discover. Like in the arcade, the gallery becomes a space for discussion and recollection but with the coin slots removed.

I am deeply thankful to the artists included in *SEQUENCEBREAK//*, for their inspiring work and for their continuing expansion of the field. I am grateful for the VSW staff for facilitating this exhibition, and for the generous support of VSW's funders, without whom this exhibition would not be possible. I would also like to thank the essay writers included in this catalog: LeeRoy Lewin, who penned a fiery, manifesto-like text on DIY game-making, and Everest Pipkin, whose essay lays out before us a history of games and the artists who make them. Both authors expressed to me the difficulty of beginning to untangle the complex relationship between video games, play, and art (making), and I appreciate their authentic, informed perspectives.

My hope for the exhibition and its related programs at VSW is to inspire artists and game developers to further consider games as a site for experimentation and expression, and to channel energy into a local and regional alternative games artist community here in Rochester, New York. So much of the activity around games happens online, and to pull it out onto the real-life ground creates new opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Along with the exhibition, we are sharing a toolkit designed to highlight several approachable game-making tools for artists of varying skill levels to begin to make interactive digital art. We are also hosting a *game jam* during the exhibition (see page 6 for more details), inviting artists to participate regardless of past experience.

Demystification of how video game art is made is at the heart of my curatorial, educational, and art practices. As the internet becomes further bought up by corporations, it becomes less of a space for free knowledge sharing. We find ourselves today at the mercy of hate-driven algorithms patterned to foster addiction and division. Human-made guideposts are of increasing (non-monetary) value. Please think of *SEQUENCEBREAK//* as an opportunity to engage with an artist community, have an open dialogue on games, to play, and ask questions. Empowering ourselves to understand how digital media is made outside of the boundaries of industry (games or otherwise) and learning how it can be shared in venues on our own terms is one of today's most urgent forms of resistance. ◢

free and/or open source tools to make small games

In conjunction with the exhibition, VSW is sharing a list of tools that artists may use to get started with making games. **Twine** and **Bitsy** are both approachable tools for making small games quickly, whereas **Godot** and **Unity** are more complex, open-ended, and require more familiarity with game-making concepts. *There are no right ways to begin using these tools, but both Twine and Bitsy are great places to start learning!*

Throughout the exhibition, VSW will also host a four-month long **game jam**, encouraging artists to make, play, and share. A *game jam* is an event where artists make a video game from scratch over a set amount of time. Game jams are often collaborative, with teams of artists working togther on one project. There may be a theme for the game jam, such as "make a horror game in Godot," "make a game based on a dream you had this week," or "make a game that is accessible to blind players." Game jams typically have a time limit, which can range from a couple of hours to a month to several years. The goal of a game jam is not to make a polished, finished product, but to be encouraged to try something new, learn from others, and experiment.

Join us for **Coding in the Park** on June 14, the first of potentially many gatherings for artists and makers to learn more about some of these tools.

Twine

easily create choose-your-own-adventure style games with text, images, and small bits of code. a great place to start learning the basics of making your own games! can be used in your web-browser or as a downloaded software. designed by Chris Klimas.

- **learn: HTML, CSS, Javascript**
- **site: twinery.org**

Bitsy

approachable tool for making small, lo-fi, 2D worlds to explore and interact with. perfect for makers who want to experiment and doodle. bitsy is used by a thriving DIY community of artists. designed by Adam le Doux.

- **learn: basic game design elements**
- **site: bitsy.org**

◦ *HINTS* ◦

itch.io is a website for hosting small games to share and play online. Games can be uploaded for free, with settings to allow players to download a game for no cost or for a certain price, which directly supports the maker.

◦ ***HINTS*** ◦

Github.com is a website for freely sharing code, apps, and other types of files. You can also use it to host your own live, DIY website!

Godot

open source software for making complex or simple 2D and 3D games of any genre. intermediate to advanced skill level recommended (but not required).

- **learn: multiple coding languages**
- **site: godotengine.org**

Unity

industry standard game-engine with thorough documentation and tutorials for creating many types of games. not open source, but free to use with a personal account.

- **learn: C#, 3D graphics, shaders**
- **site: unity.com**

◦ ***HINTS*** ◦

Many of the games in SEQUENCEBREAK// are available on itch.io or Steam. Steam is an online storefront for distributing and selling games. Steam requires a fee to set up a digital storefront, and Valve, the corporation that maintains Steam, takes a 30% commission on any sales made.

Sign up for our newsletter at **vsw.org** and watch our **itch.io** page for more updates throughout the run of *SEQUENCEBREAK//* at:

https://visualstudiesworkshop.itch.io/

Here are more suggested free and/or open source tools that are beginner friendly:

Decker
Make Hypercard-inspired multimedia projects and point-and-click games.
https://internet-janitor.itch.io/decker

Videotome
Design narratives with text and images.
https://communistsister.itch.io/videotome

Puzzlescript
Create puzzles with this open source HTML5 puzzle maker.
https://www.puzzlescript.net/

GB Studio
Make your own Game Boy games with an easy-to-use drag and drop interface.
https://www.gbstudio.dev/

Flatgame
Intuitively and quickly make a small collage world to explore.
https://flatgame.itch.io/first-timers-tutorial

Ren'Py
An open source visual novel maker.
https://www.renpy.org/

Electric Zine Maker
Easily design zines for online/print.
https://alienmelon.itch.io/electric-zine-maker

electronic dial-A. boy
MIKE
BOB
PAUL
CARLOS
DAVE
DON'T WORRY!!!!!!!!!
I'M A MURDERER!!!!!!!!!!
.....yes???

Anthology of the Killer
Stephen Gillmurphy
2024

Made over the course of four years by Stephen Gillmurphy and originally uploaded to the online games community Game Jolt, *Anthology of the Killer* is a collection of serialized nightmare scenarios, delicately handmade with a frantic, DIY punk quality.

Each episode included in the anthology takes full advantage of the dream-logic of video games, blurring the lines between game playing, wandering through a party, and witnessing an alien ritual. Reminiscent of the great children's cartoons of the 1990s, the game features equal parts humor and horror, depicting a worldview that is both critical of society's values as shallow, dangerous, and hypocritical, and revels in the strangeness and obsessiveness of ordinary people.

Filled with wiggling paintings, dark hallways, disgruntled policemen, and secret rooms, *Anthology of the Killer* is a maximalist video game filled with thousands of jokes about art, games, and contemporary culture. In other words, as Gillmurphy writes of the game, "NOBODY GETS OUT OF HERE ALIVE!!"

Available at:
https://thecatamites.itch.io/anthology-of-the-killer

Tools

Unity
Doodle Studio 95
Yamaha FB-01
Free VST plug-ins

Stephen Gillmurphy, known under the online pen name thecatamites, is a prolific Irish small games developer known for their experimental, satirical, and genre-defying freeware games. thecatamites has been making and supporting games in several DIY/alternative games communities for almost two decades. Their work has been featured in major games press publications such as *Rock Paper Shotgun* and exhibited at art spaces like babycastles and Apexart.

BlueSuburbia
Nathalie Lawhead
2023

BlueSuburbia is a poetic, haunted, 3D landscape where players are asked to confront difficult questions, feelings, and memories, while navigating a dense, surreal maze. Appearing at first as a vision of horror, *BlueSuburbia* reveals itself to be in search of hope, asking its players to stay vigilant and to hang on to faith.

Originating as a net-art Flash-based cult classic from 1999, this contemporary re-imagining of the artist's work furthers the themes of feeling isolated and vulnerable in today's heightened cultural climate. Lawhead writes that "*BlueSuburbia* is a commentary on strength and not giving up despite the world trying to destroy you. You are the light in that darkness."

Available at:
https://bluesuburbia.com/

Tools

Unreal Engine
Blender
Bitsy
Pocket Platformer
Decker
Flash

Nathalie Lawhead is a net-artist and game designer that has been creating experimental digital art since the late 1990s. Past works include titles such as the IGF winning *Tetrageddon Games*, "Everything is going to be OK", and the *Electric Zine Maker*. Their art exists in the complicated intersection between art and games. Lawhead is a proponent for and creator of widely used open source, DIY digital tools. Their work is featured in places like the Rhizome ArtBase, and in the video game collection of the Museum of Modern Art. They have earned numerous awards and honors, including the Independent Games Festival Nuovo Award, Indiecade's Interaction Award, and A MAZE's Digital Moment Award.

Time Machine Bronzeville

Philip Mallory Jones

2024

Created by artist Philip Mallory Jones and Alchemy Media Publishing Co., *Time Machine Bronzeville* is a narrative game that explores the "stories, cityscape, legends, and lore of Chicago's South Side circa 1940." Blending a rich array of interactive 3D scenes, audio recordings, historical photographs, newspaper clippings, and other ephemera, the game provides a vivid re-creation of the Bronzeville neighborhood, known as the "Black Metropolis" in the early 20th century due to its high concentration of black-owned businesses and thriving artist community.

Centered around a detailed scale model of the neighborhood, *Time Machine Bronzeville* encourages a slow-paced, research-based exploration that reveals a wide range of narratives, chronicling real stories of both the everyday and the extraordinary. Through the malleable medium of the digital-interactive, the work brings disparate records and documents together to create a space where people's lives and histories matter.

Available at:
https://store.steampowered.com/app/2690900/Time_Machine_Bronzeville/

Tools

Unreal Engine

Photoshop

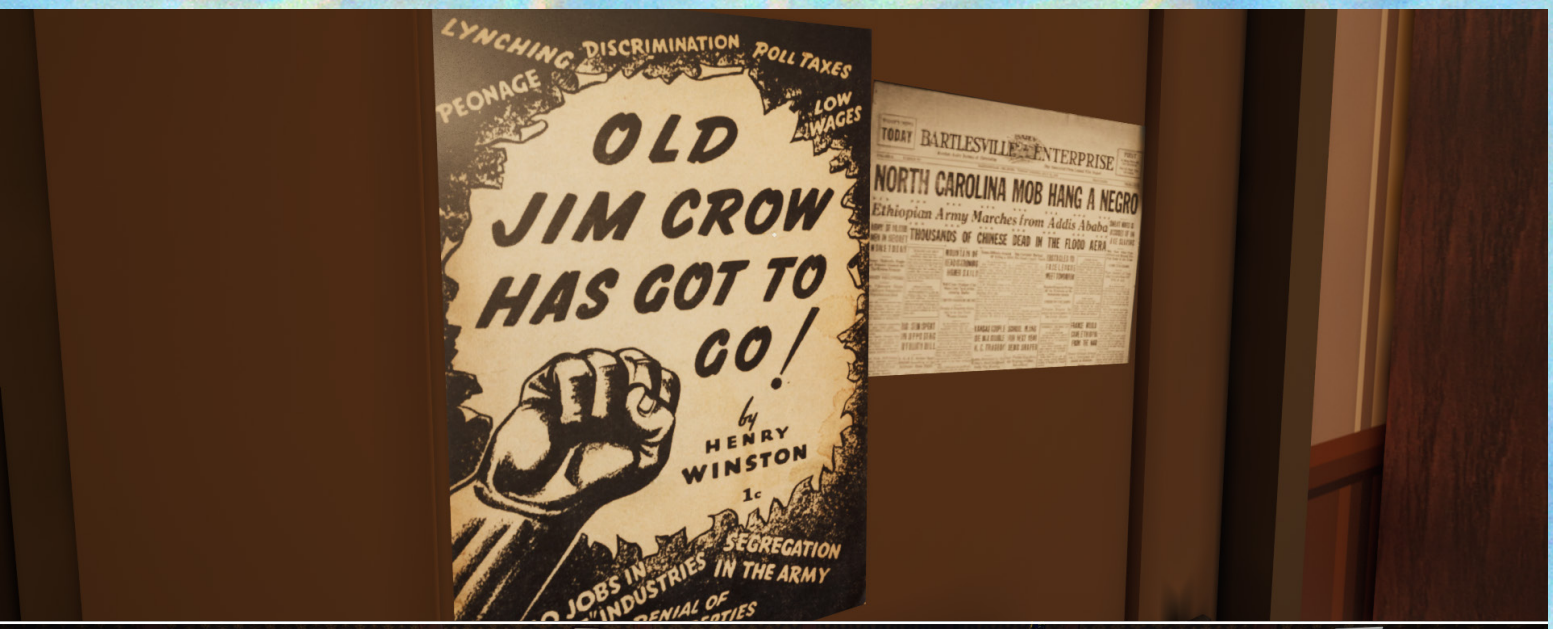
Premiere Pro

DAZ 3D Studio

SketchUp

Blender

Philip Mallory Jones is internationally recognized as an innovator and educator in the media arts, with a career spanning more than half a century. Jones was co-founder and Director of Ithaca Video Projects (1972-1984), and the Annual Ithaca Video Festival (1975-1984). Internationally, Jones has conducted research, production, and exhibition of his media art in the Caribbean and Central America, Europe, West and Southern Africa, South Pacific, and India. Jones' work has been supported by the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, American Film Institute, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Smithsonian Institution, New York State Council on the Arts, among others. Jones is Creative Director of Alchemy Media Publishing Company.


LYNCHING
DISCRIMINATION
POLL TAXES
PEONAGE
LOW WAGES
OLD JIM CROW HAS GOT TO GO!
by HENRY WINSTON
1c
SEGREGATION IN THE ARMY
TODAY
BARTLESVILLE ENTERPRISE
NORTH CAROLINA MOB HANG A NEGRO
Ethiopian Army Marches from Addis Ababa
THOUSANDS OF CHINESE DEAD IN THE FLOOD AERA

REGAL

SEGA OiL
SEGA OiL
SEGA OiL
MADE THE
AMERICAN WAY
50 BILLION SOLD
50 BILLION SOLD
ALAMO
GUNS
FOXY LADY
MADE THE
AMERICAN WAY
PIZZA TO GO
ALAMO
PIZZA TO GO

Black Room

Cassie McQuater

2017

Black Room is a browser-based, feminist dungeon crawler that features a cast of vintage, pre-existing video game sprites ripped from their original contexts in order to bring them together to form new, resilient narratives. Primarily women characters from a wide range of games mingle together in impossible landscapes, linked together by dream logic as they perform their looping animations.

A game meant to be played late at night, *Black Room* is a hazy broadcast, a mysterious website, a portal that makes space to begin to imagine radical futures outside the bounds of ownership, industry, and patriarchy.

The web browser, re-sizable, becomes a type of controller, housing secrets beyond its borders. Operating the game can feel uncanny, like navigating someone else's computer.

Available at:
http://www.cassiemcquater.com/blackroom.html

Tools

HTML/CSS

Javascript

Phaser

Typed.js

Cassie McQuater is a new media and video game artist living and working in Los Angeles. Her practice involves hours of surfing the net, mining for digital artifacts, and repurposing them as a way to reflect on and reinvent our relationship with interactive storytelling. Grounded in the practice of net art, investigating networked systems of digital power, her work often deals with themes of cyberfeminism while critiquing and seeking to subvert sexist tropes in video games and media. Exploring modes of representation and cultural production, she frequently distributes work for free over the web, as a way to give back to communities. Her work has been shown and featured as part of the Smithsonian American Art Arcade, with New Museum's First Look: New Art Online, at many DIY gallery arcade spaces and at alternative game festivals around the world, and has won awards including the 2019 Independent Games Festival Nuovo Award, Rhizome micro-grant for net.art, and the 2019 Lumen Prize.

Out for Delivery

Heart Street

Yuxin Gao
Lillyan Ling
Gus Boehling
John Bruneau

2020

Out For Delivery is a 42-minute interactive documentary shot with a 360-degree camera. The slice-of-life experience follows a food delivery courier in Beijing on January 23, 2020, the day before Lunar New Year's Eve, and the day Wuhan shut down due to COVID-19.

Wholly unique in its cinematic presentation, the game features an intense honesty, and through its own self-awareness, avoids operating as an "empathy machine," a common criticism of virtual reality projects that flatten or capitalize on real human experience.

In retrospect, the footage, a valuable historical document of everyday life in Beijing on the verge of global pandemic, feels tense, breathless, but also reminds players of the warmth and power of human connection.

Available at:
https://out-for-delivery.com/

Tools

Unity
Insta360 OneX
Ableton
Reaper
GIMP
a pencil
scanner

Heart Street (Yuxin Gao, Lillyan Ling, Gus Boehling, John Bruneau) is a loosely structured collective created by indie game artists in New York City. Individual members have served as founding members of other game and art collectives. Heart Street projects often bring expertise from other fields into games.

Out For Delivery has received prestigious awards including Indiecade's Impact Award and the GSA BAFTA Immersive Award and has been exhibited at the Museum of Pop Culture (Seattle, WA) and at Now Play This (London, UK).

AIR
美团外卖

I don't know. I don't live here.

Hey, do you know where to find Top Spicy Hot Pot?

Can't afford to f*cking eat.
Here, sit.

I'm going to Pan Jia Yuan next.

AIR
美团外卖

There Is No Unconnected World

by Everest Pipkin

Let me start by saying: This essay did not come easy. When I was first approached about writing this text, I thought the prompt, "What are we talking about when we talk about games—and why do we care about how they're made?" would be easy enough to explore, given that I spend my days as a lecturer talking about just this. But the history of games and play (and the tools and societies that go into their construction) is broad and generally quite mutable.

As ever, I found myself trying to start at the top. But the timeline of videogame history does not offer a clear example of "The First Videogame"—at least as a thing that is coherent and utterly distinct from plays, mock trials, parlor games, cards, board games, sports, storytelling, slots, game shows, competitions, and all the rest. Instead, we have to define the term and draw those lines ourselves.

Obviously, the *clear* distinction that videogames possess over other kinds of games is the addition of a screen as well as a computational engine that drives or mediates play on that screen. The formalist approach is alluring here ("Is there a screen? Then it's a videogame"), but I'd like to suggest that another big departure of the videogame from other types of games is that the role of the rules-keeper (see: referee; gamemaster; dealer; kid on the playground who knows all the rules by heart; etc.) has been externalized into a computational system. This constraint is powerful; programmed rules are generally not as mutable as they might be in a game of pickup football or a boardgame played with a child. However, as we see in the continued popularity of digital solitaire—less mutable or winnable does not make for less satisfying.

The other thing that videogames as a medium offer are invented worlds, created by others for the express purpose of play. Insofar as to engage with any artwork is to enter an experience mediated for you, loading up a level of a game—from the simplest arcade platformer, to the vast open world landscapes of contemporary high dollar production—is to enter a pact not just with the computer but with the makers of that space.

Nothing is accidental here in the world of the game. Every menu bar filigree was intentional, every tree was placed (if not by hand, by a system whose rules were sculpted by hand). What counts as valid terrain, how you move between icons in the settings, even gravity itself—the way your simulated body hits the ground or moves through the air—was determined actively, with attention. It is all the built world, with the fingerprints of its makers shot right through.

The earliest computer games were generally written in labs by research scientists and used as demonstrations of the capabilities of mainframe computers. In the 1950s and 60s, versions of tic-tac-toe and tennis were rendered on the oscilloscope outputs of university analog computers, generally still housed in mathematics departments, and playable by prospective students and their parents at open house days.

There is a reason that these early games were written by research scientists—generally programmed in the assembly language and punched into paper tape by hand, this was not programming as we know it now. Even outputting a dot on a screen required complicated interfacing with external equipment through analog signals.

Many people point at 1962's *Spacewar!* as the first clearly recognizable videogame. Programmed on a PDP-1 mainframe and featuring two player-controlled spaceships in a dogfight in the gravity well of a star, *Spacewar!* was all but ubiquitous anywhere programmers hung their hats in the 60s and 70s. It's not a boring game, even now—watching skilled players fling their ships around the star, boosting into a gravity assist while the other blips out of existence in an emergency hyper-drive only to pop in directly behind the first ship can still make you gasp. But that is not why I bring it up.

There are two things about *Spacewar!* that are worth dwelling on here. One, that the original developer, Steve Russell, avoided starting work on the game for almost a year because there wasn't a trigonometric function routine

for the PDP-1, which was needed to calculate the trajectories of the spacecraft. A future collaborator on the project, Alan Kotok, started making phone calls and found that such a program already existed at the DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation) labs a few cities over. He drove over and picked up the tape, which formed the basis of the eventual physics engine for the game.

And two, *Spacewar!* was vastly influential in part because it was not commercialized. Over the next decade, the game populated mainframe and minicomputers anywhere they existed. The code was adapted and changed, ported to new systems and languages, hacked, modded, improved, broken, and learned from. Regional variants and new twists popped up, especially as microcomputing entered hobbyist homes. *Spacewar!* never left the public domain.

I linger on these notes because you can see echoes of this in how videogames are still made, shared, and played. The medium *has* grown and changed remarkably over the interceding 70-odd years. For instance, the average kind of room in which videogames are played has wandered depending on both time and geography, from research labs to arcades to living rooms to LAN cafes to phones. Mediums of distribution have remade themselves a hundred times over, from punch tape to floppies, cartridges to CDs, digital downloads to cloud saves. The kinds of experiences that the genre encompasses continue to shift and evolve. And from this has emerged "the Industry"—the *business* of game development, including both large-scale AAA games that may take millions of dollars and hundreds of people to produce, *and* independent developers who are seeking to market and sell their work.

Although AAA development is highly visible, it is safe to say that the majority of videogame development over time has been independent. Not only is it still common for games to be made by individuals or small teams, but until the early 1990s this was the only way *anyone* made games—whether a home-brew coder working on a fan game in their bedroom or a small studio making a new RPG for the Gameboy. The much-lauded emergence of the "indie developer" in the mid-2000s to describe a certain kind of solo auteur (with all of the accompanying baggage of any myth of genius) was more of a *throwback* than an invention. However, few if any games can truly be called solo projects. In much the same way that *Spacewar!*'s original trigonometry program was borrowed and adapted for use in play, almost every contemporary videogame is a collaboration.

Videogames are simply too big and complex to make alone. Even the most isolated developer, bug fixing alone late at night on some complex problem in a game engine they rolled themselves, using assets they drew themselves, scored to music they wrote themselves, is almost always doing so using computational systems and programming languages made by others. And for most developers, using a game engine like Godot, Unity, Unreal Engine, or Game Maker Studio (or Ren'Py, Pico-8, LÖVE, Knytt Stories, or any of hundreds or thousands more esoteric varieties), as well as incorporating public domain assets, open-source code, forum suggestions, past design solutions, sound libraries, playtesting advice, and all the rest, are the very things that allows games to be made at all.

Game development has inherited a fair amount of this ethos from computer programming in general, especially from the early days of home internet, where shareware, ROM hacks, game building tools, scraped assets, code examples, and cracked software made the rounds with little to no regard to whether they were currently or ever beholden to copyright. Despite an ongoing and healthy undercurrent of piracy, the internet of the present is a little less blatant in this regard. But a social understanding of collaborative sharing of work and expertise has persisted—from free starter asset packs to the coding-question forum Stack Overflow, from project blog posts and how-to videos to complete camera systems ready to drop into a game engine, game development is a remarkably transparent discipline. This is in spite of (or maybe even *because* of) its somewhat brutal financial and work realities, in which game developers are underpaid and overworked compared to other related jobs, with no guarantee of success.

I mentioned the Industry before, highlighting that indie developers *do* decidedly belong inside of it. But there is also a community of game makers who are generally considered outside of industry, who make games or game tools without attempting to see any profit. This includes the hobbyists, modders, hackers, and tinkerers. It also includes the *children,* who at any given hour of the day make up a significant portion of the people actively making videogames, whether those are on platforms like Roblox, through Scratch or other "learn programming"-type tools, or within other games in the form of roleplay or mods.

Outside of industry also often (though not always) means those making art games and any of the other categories unified under the "small games" banner (see: flatgames; notgames; altgames; trashgames; game poems; etc.), which can depart somewhat radically from conventional game design goals of "fun," "fidelity," and even "playability." These games sometimes *do* have sales,

but as often as not they are made for galleries, public commissions, towards personal or career prestige, or simply for the love of the thing.

And finally, non-industry almost certainly describes the "we're just hanging out" crowd, whether that is the person in the Discord server making chill out rooms in VRchat, or the invite-only fan remake of a classic browser game that is always on the precipice of being sued by the original IP, or any other kind of project that pays its server costs through a PayPal link to which its community members might donate the cost of a coffee.

Truly, a survey of "non-industry" games could easily lead to a series of these kinds of community spaces. Described sometimes as "zones" (a term that resolved around 2020 to mean a particular kind of social hangout in virtual space—see: tinybird.zone; Freeplay ZONE; likelike online; Zonelets), these are places to hang out in, systems to play with, speedruns to perfect, and anything else made for the express purpose of spending time with, adjacent to, or in service towards your community.

It's this impulse that is, for me, one of the most generous and generative arms of game development. It is a sentiment that understands that while *playing* a game can be fun, evocative, fascinating, collaborative, joyful, and creatively stimulating, so is making them. And it is this belief that leads to the development of not just community-driven games (and "zones") but also community-driven game-making *tools*.

We are living in an era that is abundant with open-source, free, or otherwise ideologically-driven tool building. The emergence of this wealth of artist-made, technically esoteric, or aesthetically distinct tools for game creation (and the resultant games made with of them) might be *the* defining characteristic of the last 15 years of non-commercial game design. They are often unified under the banner of "accessible" tools, which approaches accessibility from different angles for different needs—including financial cost, computational power required, ease of learning, ease of finding, ease of distribution, color, font, and visual choices, and many other vectors.

Tools like the interactive fiction hyperlink engine Twine (2009) have been likened to have done for games what the photocopier did for zines. Which is to say, while a photocopier cannot in and of itself teach a zinester how to write, it *can* remove financial, technical, and social barriers to layout, printing, and distribution of publications, which is much of the work of producing a book. In 2012, Anna Anthropy described Twine as critical to a new generation of game developers who were now able to access the artistic, narrative, and design aspects of game creation without first needing to own an expensive computer, be connected to industry support, or even know how to program. And given that Twine exports its playable game as an html file, *sharing* these games was as simple as finding somewhere on the internet to host them—a process that created communities organized around spaces where Twine games could be found, played, and discussed.

Perhaps the most notorious online community for making, sharing and playing non-commercial games is Glorious Trainwrecks, a forum and community space that organized around the 1994 educational children's software Klik & Play. Klik & Play has a buggy, clip-art, drag n' drop aesthetic that has been embraced by a community of developers interested in the lowbrow and unpolished aesthetic of home brew games. Although Glorious Trainwrecks saw its heyday in the early 2010s, the site is still active and still runs the occasional 2-hour game jam, a time limit so extreme that it radically impacts the resulting submissions. To quote the homepage of glorioustrainwrecks.com:

> It's about throwing a bunch of random crap into your game and keeping whatever sticks. About bringing back a time when you didn't care so much about "production values," as much as ripping sound samples from your favourite television shows to use in your game, or animating pictures of yourself making goofy faces on your webcam… It doesn't matter if you've got talent, so long as you've got *gusto*.

While Klik & Play has not been updated since it was released as freeware in the mid-1990s, sometimes the relationship between tool and community is circular, with each continuously informing and influencing the other. This is certainly true of the free web-based game engine Bitsy, which was first released by Adam Le Doux in 2017. Bitsy allows game makers to develop small, room-based games that run in the browser. It has a highly recognizable pixel art style and a set of logical limitations and constraints that have come to define the games that are made inside of it.

Bitsy has been near-continuously updated since its release almost eight years ago—responding to community requests, integrating popular hacks and mods, accepting public code contributions, and generally growing to fit the needs of its users while never compromising its core aesthetic or technical principles. At the same time, these users have explored the tool's edges, expanding its capacities and pushing its limits, and have often contributed the very suggestions, bug fixes, and expansions that will, with the next update, define what they can and cannot do inside of the engine.

As of this writing, there are 5,437 games tagged with Bitsy on the popular game hosting service itch.io, which is the current de facto home for small game discovery.

While I could go on for another several paragraphs about any of hundreds of game-making tools and their resultant communities (the Hypercard-influenced Decker comes to mind, as does the phone-based collage engine Downpour, the drag-n-drop GameBoy ROM maker GB Studio, and the ASCII-art program Playscii), I mostly want to dial in on the fact that each of these tools has a particular ethos, ideology, and capacity that are defined by its limits.

Many of these tools have a low-tech sensibility, aiming to run on any kind of device, from old phones to cheap laptops, no new graphics card required. Others are expressly built in and produce work for the browser—granting games made inside of them the same flexibility of distribution possessed by any website, circumnavigating pay-to-list game storefronts like Steam. Some of these tools produce intentionally small files for low-bandwidth, climate-collapse-resistant creative futures, while still others contain logical arguments about what is important in game design itself—an engine for walking and looking makes for a different kind of game than an engine with a lock and key puzzle system at its core.

And almost all these open-source, free, accessible, or artist-made game creation tools are not afraid to have a look and feel that's all their own. Freed from the industry-serving need to be fully extensible, completely customizable, and aesthetically blank, few if any of these small game engines are particularly concerned with the fact that they have limits. In fact, these limits are not fundamentally *limiting*. Instead, to make a Bitsy game, or a Twine poem, or a Decker stack, or even just a handmade website is to be in conversation with the medium, its other practitioners, future players, and past tool creators.

I own two sets of watercolor paints from when I painted more regularly. From where I'm writing this, I can see them both—in the dustiest corner of my desk, one stacked on top of the other. The first is in a hinged, hard plastic case and contains 20-odd square briquettes of commercial paint, purchased over the years at art supply stores as I needed a better brown or a brighter green. They are beautiful colors and paint predictably and well. The other set is housed in a cigar box and has only seven pigments, squished into seashells of varying sizes and shapes. It was a gift, and each paint-shell was filled by hand, by the giver, with pigment made of plants from their garden.

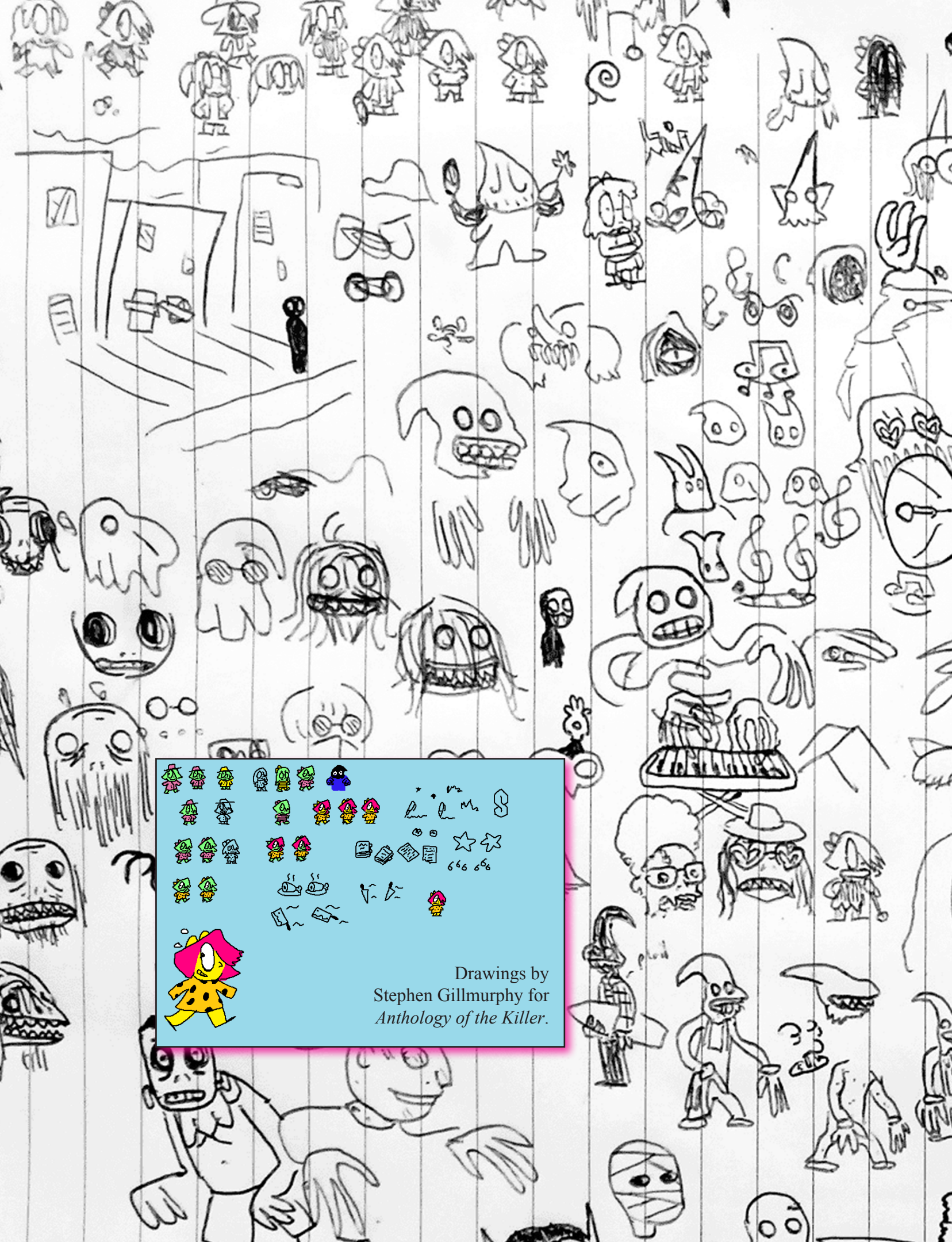
I use both sets of paints occasionally, but the latter is precious to me. Despite only containing seven colors (all of which are earth-tones), every time I use it I think about my friend in their summer garden, in 2016, picking the handfuls of mint that now paint as a bright, sunshine yellow. Our collaboration stands out on the page. But the other set of paints was also, every part of it, touched by human makers—albeit ones more distanced from me (and likely also from their labor). Still—they made it all.

To play a game, or to make one, is fundamentally to be in an active, ongoing conversation with others—no matter the scale of the production or the polish with which personal touch is attempted to be scrubbed from the game world. It's all made by hand and it's all played by hand (regardless of whether hands are *actually* used in the playing). The memory of the computer, the social mediator in the videogame, is both very big and very patient. It can hold these collaborations open for decades, in what is becoming *generational* time.

When a player boots up an emulated *Spacewar!* on the Internet Archive (or, certainly, when a hobbyist game historian *builds* the emulator), they are reopening a connection to a trigonometry program on punch tape that was driven in the back of a station wagon in the summer of 1961, and to late night dogfights on the stolen time of mainframes of a dozen-odd campuses, and to every hack and mod and hot fix that made that game what it is. And because gameplay is active, this connection cuts both ways. Who is to say a player might not, all these years later, find a new way of engaging that pushes and shifts what "ideal" play even looks like—something that fundamentally changes the rules or understanding of the game itself.

Even though game spaces have boundaries, they are not isolated. Game-making tools, from the scrappiest homebrew software to the largest proprietary engine, are made with this understanding. Game developers, who thrive on an ethos of both borrowing and sharing expertise, assets, code, and design solutions understand this. And players do too—the feeling of playing in a constructed, active, considered space is one of the core tenants of the medium itself. It is all handmade. There is no unconnected world.

Everest Pipkin is a game developer, artist, and educator whose work both in the studio and in the garden follows themes of ecology, tool making, and fantasies of collapse and isolation– as well as the labor, maintenance, devotion, and collective care so often present in those fantasies. They produce printed material as books and zines, as well as digital work for the browser and in game engines. They also make drawings on paper.



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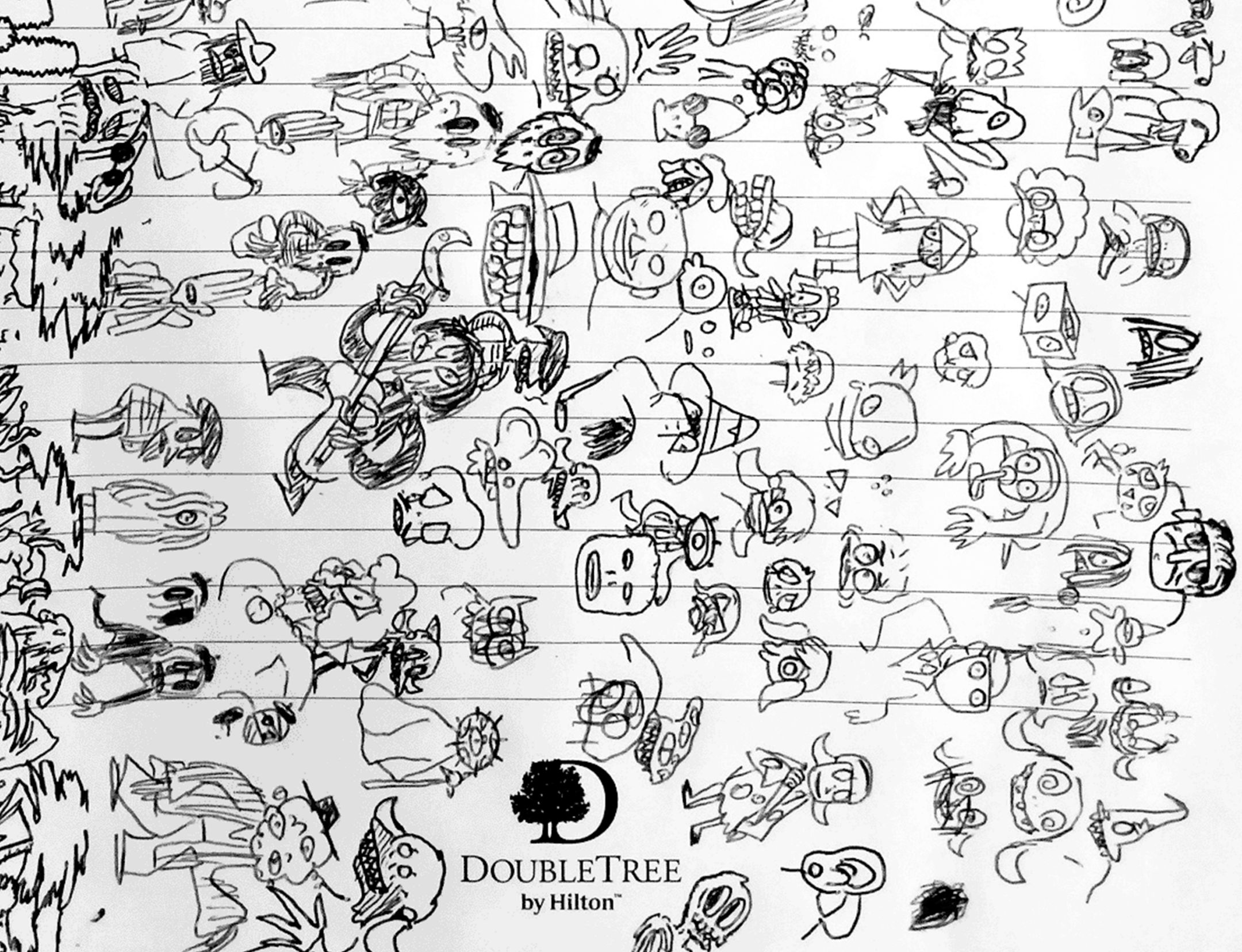

DOUBLETREE
by Hilton™

Game Art in the Age of Digital Transformation

by LeeRoy Lewin

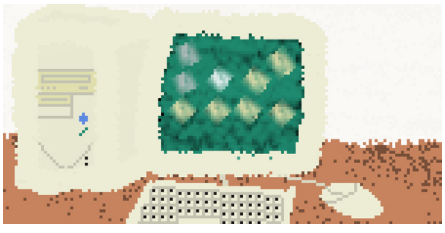
We are all *users* now. End receptacles. Using for someone else's gain. We get benefits, all kinds of different payments, in exchange for our acquiescence. Knowledge is generally free and accessible. Connections are now global. Our jobs seem to run smoother on networked technologies. Living essentials, like chores, medicine, and commerce, all seem to become more convenient. Our social circles grow, our opportunities expand, and yes, we can watch funny videos on demand.

By necessity users are imagined as statically as possible. A "user experience" is expected, planned out. We participate in carved out, unilateral ways. The user is our new nation. Without needing to imagine words like "hegemony" or "normative," the chase for users guides our infrastructure, economy, and government. Each modification of life, each impossible model, each algorithmic mirror made to hold us in place online, has slow consequences offline. A common misconception is that only one of these worlds is *real*—but they are both real, one beside the other. This commercialized *other-world*, by facilitating both worlds, is now all-consuming, turning whatever is ineffable about our views, our tastes, and our personality, into a commodity that can be tracked and sold.

Still, the *other-world* has become a refuge for millions. This gives me mixed feelings. I was of the first generation of users. Our household was poor, but we had Windows. Poverty made me conscious of the limits imposed on my life. Those real limits made the *other-world*'s limits feel safely habitable. I thought this new world was better than the physical one as I came to know its rules better than those of the "real" world, carving out spaces that didn't yet bear relation to real ones.

Lately I have come to despise my computer. I've had the disquieting feeling that I'm someone who always needs something else, somewhere else. After decades I feel like I'm being used up by technology. More people are joining me in the *other-world*. It no longer matters how much you are restricted outside of it. Everyone is finding the same refuge, the same de-realization I found within it. Our transformation is now one into specters, data-ghosts intruding on other people's lives.

It can feel wrong to admit that we live alongside this computer-



generated world. We've collectively agreed that this transformation has a fault line, each of us lacking in self-control. Even if I had that self-control, my bank account would remain a coded relationship between numerical values. My identity would stay in a database. This simulacrum of myself, made by platforms and advertisers, is bought and passed around. From my data-self, a curated sensibility of everything is made for me. Although I know I'm being monitored, and that curation is tailored to my receding volition, I sometimes have a giddy sense of seeing impossible things. My refuge at least seems real. In the *other-world* I see powerful people making decisions I wouldn't otherwise be privy to. I can see people dying all across the physical world. I get the feeling that the world I watch, our collective other-world, is more *real* than the other one.

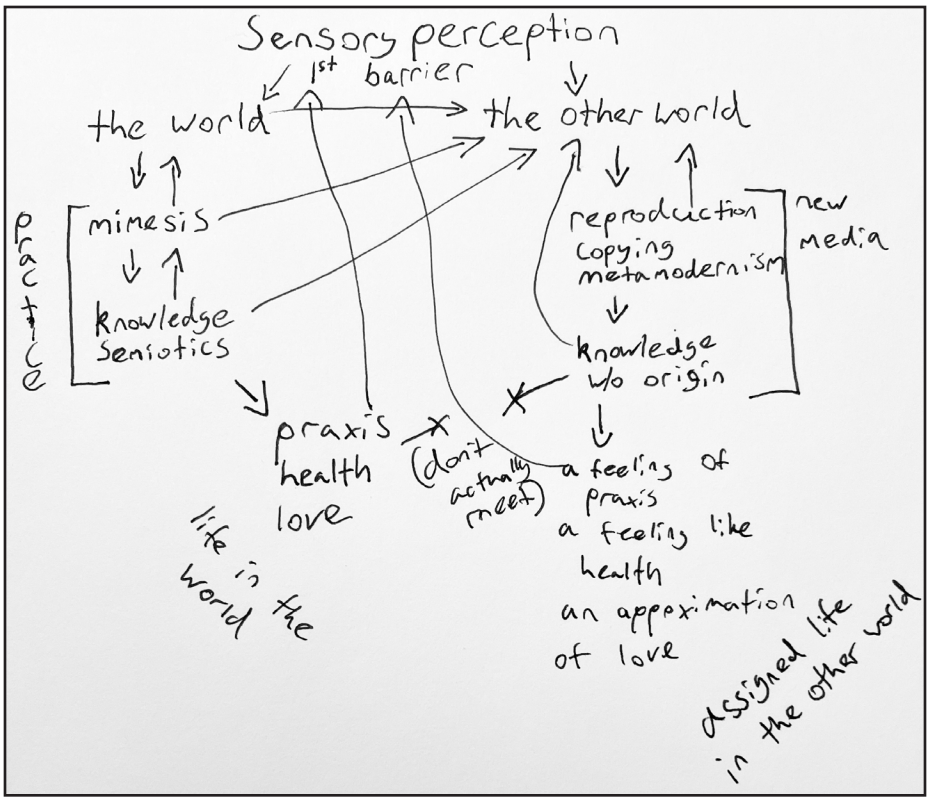
In a teleological sense, the video game *is* this other-world. They share the same code. If you're familiar with the history of this technology, then what I'm about to say isn't shocking: Video games are essential to our digital present. They're responsible for the adoption of computers. They're a historical site of media and technological experimentation that provided the conceptual bedrock for networked media infrastructure. They're like mechanical jesters, manufacturing consent for the erosion of our

physical norms.

In a video game, each thing is given a new, detached, specific function. A game is rarely made to be boring. This comes from the need for a game to inspire its own gathering, for a social function to be layered on the other-world. That thing-ness is typically something one wants to see others perform. This need forces recognizable, or real, units of meaning into nonsensical, surrealistic, unreal other-orders, made for the explicit purpose of attracting users. The video game is the refuse, or byproduct of this single-minded experimentation. Our digital symbols, our ordinary meanings, become laundered, transformed by rigid machine languages, then transformed again by more rigid commercial expectations.

In the past, when people first brushed up against this other-world, game authors were discovering new kinds of speculative material protruding through the gaps of sensation. We were seeing how light could be manipulated; we were exploring sensation through our tools; we were exploring how to connect, and relate, disparate physical sensations to symbolic representations. We were seeing the familiar become unfamiliar through symbolic collages and our new cyborgian bodies. This is what still draws me to video games—game-art contains a new way of seeing and existing simultaneously.

Video games accelerated as a product-driven industry, one that had no prior form or occupied any niche. Beginning in university computer labs, they were commercially inserted into the existing market of amusement machines. By the late 1980s, games were more or less understood as a new kind of toy—no longer as a science experiment. Our full-body, empirical, experimental toys constitute a form so driven by its own magnetism, so filled with



"Praxis Health Love" diagram by LeeRoy Lewin

outsiders and outsider artists, that prior ideas of art and audience don't really apply.

Early game artists, like David Crane (*Pitfall!*), Dona Bailey (*Centipede*), or Takahide Harima (*Frogger*), see the video game as an encounter with life. Their games, spurred by immense feelings of first contact with underexplored, underacknowledged schemas of ordering, arranging, and reacting to the new digital other-world, sought to suggest, or simulate, things humans do. No video game, whether from the 1980s or from today, can do this accurately. So these other-world versions allow us to meditate on a symbolic version of something that can happen. These early games are driven by an arresting naïveté. Their intense aspiration to emulate something they are not opposes a tradition of art aware of its own mimesis. Some of the best game artists, like Osamu Sato (*Dream Emulator*) or Muriel Tramis (*Freedom*) lean into this adaptive, living multimedia container, in order to synthesize something that is both alive and impossible.

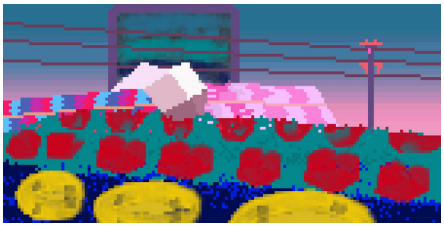
Most game authors, like Shigeryu Miyamoto (*Mario*), or Akitoshi Kawazu (*Final Fantasy, SaGa*), focus intensely on representing things we cannot do. These games are entirely within a referential mode. They put their audience into familiar roles, teasing players with new agency. While drawing somewhat on the figurative tendencies of surrealism, the imagination of speculative fiction, and the morass of pop culture, mainstream video games try to isolate themselves from their influences by prioritizing causality or mathematical consequences. These games are intentional about whatever the player thinks they're doing—this boundary of anticipation and participation is prioritized over the game's visual output or a sense of textualism.

The mainstream video game tends to fixate entirely on adjusting and curating its participatory elements to the detriment of other vectors of engagement.

Through encompassing participation, commercial video games sell a fantasy of reality transformation. I remember seeing myself as a product spartan, a rebel against an old world, fighting proudly to escape into these other-orders. Large tech companies hold charge of a massive market by encouraging functionality that attracts and retains users while also assimilating other forms of media. This commercial center of video games has resulted in an unhinged collage of everything people are willing to buy. Commercial games can be understood as an orgiastic celebration of the status quo in all its forms (like the pop culture pantheon of *Fortnite*, the disguised pop art of *Super Mario Bros*, the interrogative speculation in *Final Fantasy*). Some people come close to worshipping the other-order. They become monastically devoted to it, imagining a stability in the other-world that is impossible in our real one. They've constructed places of worship, rituals, and doings, within the scope of every persistent modern-myth. This perpetual motion creates socialized catastrophes, reassembled from the dregs of pop culture.

These strict adherences inadvertently generate an *opposite*. Within the shadow of commercial games, a powerful counter-culture gestates, consisting of those who try to mock, transgress, merge with, capture, or interpret the other-world. Knowledge of these flows will congregate in small online third places. These shadow games exist wherever there are enough people interested in their ongoing transformation. These other-games exist in garages, or are derived from pirated software. They populate personal websites as scattered, anonymous links. They're on homebrew cartridges in clumsy pop-up stores. They're distributed through small subscriptions or on USB sticks. They show up at zine fairs. Creators are also reliant on a handful of alternative app stores, such as Itch.io or Gamejolt.com, who centrally host the majority of self-publishing, DIY game artists.

Amidst this triangulation of transforming, seeing, and existing in the other-world, games are in a unique position to annotate our developing digital world. This is why there is an incredible vitality in the game-making scene. There is an urgency among game artists that is unique. Other scenes, other artforms, don't have these same specific histories. They don't have the same coded relationships to emerging technology, so they don't have the same access, the same reactions, or the same antibodies.



I've been a part of the DIY art games scene for over a decade. When I encountered a scuffed, cobbled-together DIY game for the first time (Jake Clover's *Nuign Specter*), I was overcome with a desire to participate. Unlearning my user tendencies and my assumption that this technology could only be wrangled by an army of professionals changed how I related to the world around me. It was liberating to reconnect as a being from both worlds, finding myself retaining my individuality within a networked collective. The participatory nature of game playing bleeds into the act of creation.

Game-art has probably the largest distribution network of artistic self-publishing. There are other large networks that I participate in, but I don't believe they are as artistically motivated, or as self-interested. Other people I meet in this scene have an incredible interest in their work and how it relates to our digital transformations. We are very acclimated to being users, so we know what to resist. Our strings and attachments to the other-world become modulated, ignored, or even severed as we find each other through our work. Game-art is an incredible reverse-side counterpart to the status quo of art production, which increasingly relies on corporate or non-profit gatekeepers. Game-art is an art practice that is ambivalent to capital. It's convenient that it has very low overhead—but that's not exactly what I'm trying to say. There is no roadmap for "making it." In real time, we are still figuring out what all of this means, which allows game artists to be focused on our work, and the ways we problematize our user-driven world.

I won't pretend this is always pleasant. There are basic challenges when simply communicating where my art practice is coming from, what I believe it is doing, and what I'm trying to achieve. Still, I believe this two-way ambivalence is one of the strongest concurrent bonds I have with my fellow game-artists. Awareness of our material conditions in DIY games lets me imagine a negative utopia where the chaos of our art practice rebels against our nation of users and against the vision of a mechanically curated, data-driven other-world. I feel empowered by our rebellion, working within an ad-hoc, axiomatic democracy, amongst other outsider artists. My autonomy allows me to explore my marginal art practice in relative safety, without the dual pressures of commercial exploitation

and audience expectation.

Having game-art present in physical space acknowledges our hybrid digital world. It also acknowledges our mature-yet-still-emerging response to this transformation. Video games can be a way to build up, rinse, and purge the bile that builds up from the other-world's curated violence. Game-art annotates and comments on our digitally mediated capitalist condition, our world of doubling exploitation. To pursue this process of critique, explicitly or implicitly, game artists are sympathetically intentional, focused, and unattractive.

We are game artists! We love our techno-dependency so we can learn to hate it more efficiently. We're hyper-aware of how things are made and distributed. We play for smaller crowds. We operate permissively, ignoring ordinary artistic concerns like craft, audience, skill, and concept. We leisurely elide hierarchical approaches to art-making. We protest the panoptic dictations coming from the other-world, so we create things filled with silly objects and mysteries. We are conscious of our physical relationship with the other-world. We choose the parameters for our own doubled meanings. We reject users. We accept all that is queer and outside of the mainstream. We ask that you pay attention to your own transformation so we can all become something we really, truly want for each other.

LeeRoy Lewin is a writer and small games maker based in Seattle, Washington. They've self-published essays and games for a decade as a member of Vextro, a games collective made from cooperative queer and radical perspectives toward game making

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Questions or comments? Have ideas?
Send emails to nilsoncarroll@vsw.org.

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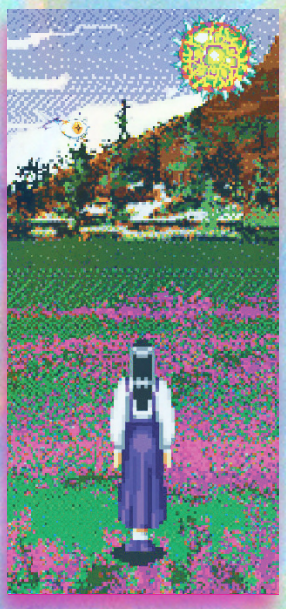

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